

Transcript

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Roots of a War (1945-1953)

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PRESIDENT DWIGHT EISENHOWER, August 4, 1953:

...So when the United States votes \$400 million to help that war, we're not voting for a giveaway program. We're voting for the cheapest way that we can prevent the occurrence of something that would be of the most terrible significance to the United States of America, our security!

PRESIDENT JOHN KENNEDY, September 2, 1963:

...If we withdrew from Vietnam, the Communists would control Vietnam. Pretty soon Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Malaya would go.

PRESIDENT LYNDON JOHNSON, August 2, 1965:

...If this little nation goes down the drain and can't maintain her independence, ask yourself, what's going to happen to all the other little nations?

PRESIDENT RICHARD NIXON, March 22, 1971:

...If the United States now were to throw in the towel and come home and the Communists took over South Vietnam, then all over Southeast Asia, all over the Pacific, in the Mideast, in Europe, in the world, the United States would suffer a blow. And peace -- because we are the great peace-keeping nation in the world today, because of our power -- would suffer a blow from which it might not recover.

NARRATOR: First a handful of advisers. Then the Marines. Finally an army of half a million. That was the Vietnam War. It was an undeclared war. A war without front lines or clear objectives. A war against an elusive enemy. A war.

MEDIC: Speak to me...

SOLDIER: Yeah, I'm still alive...

MEDIC: Speak to me...What's your name, tell me what your name is...Where're you from?

SOLDIER: Steve, Seattle, Washington.

MEDIC: Seattle, Washington...It's a good town. Good town, good town. Very good town.

SOLDIER: Can I go to sleep, Doc? Can I go to sleep?

MEDIC: No, don't go to sleep!

CAPT. FRANK HICKEY: We had some precarious situations and we lost some people, but we always won. So to me, we were very successful, you know. But as I think of it now, I don't know what we won. We won a box on a map where the next day we left it and we never came back maybe.

NARRATOR: It was a war that blurred the line between friend and enemy.

NGO THI HIEN: Wherever the Americans went, they burned and destroyed and killed. I didn't see any guerrillas being killed, only villagers.

SGT. THOMAS MURPHY: An eight-year-old or nine-year-old can kill you just as quick as a 25- or a 26-year-old man. Back here in the States, the kids were playing cowboys and indians. Over there they had been playing it for real.

NARRATOR: It was a war with deep roots, deeper than most Americans knew. Ho Chi Minh and his followers fought for decades: against the French, then against the Americans and their South Vietnamese ally.

DO VAN SU: I always believed in my country. But instead of sending my sons out to defend their country, I sent them out to die.

NARRATOR: It was a war that turned South Vietnam inside out. A war that changed the GIs who fought it.

PRIVATE GEORGE CANTERO: "GI, you want Vietnamese cigarette?" For a box of Tide, you could get a carton of pre-packed, pre-rolled marijuana cigarettes soaked in opium. For ten dollars you could get a vial of pure

heroin. You could get liquid opium, speed, acid, anything you wanted.

NARRATOR: It was the first television war...

REPORTER: What's he got...small arms?

MP: Small arms, automatic fire, grenade launcher...

NARRATOR: ...with uncensored battle reports flashed to the folks at home.

REPORTER: What's the hardest part of it?

MARINE: Not knowing where they are, that's the worst of it.

REPORTER: Have you lost any friends

MARINE: Quite a few. We lost one the other day. This whole thing stinks, really.

CROWD: Peace now, peace now...

NARRATOR: It was the first war Americans opposed in huge numbers, openly and passionately.

CROWD (singing): All we are saying is give peace a chance.

MAN: Are you listening, Nixon? Are you listening, Agnew?

NARRATOR: The Vietnam War ended when the Communists took Saigon. The end of the war left questions and issues that are still unanswered and unresolved.

PRESIDENT RONALD REAGAN, August 1980:

Well, it's time that we recognized that ours was in truth a noble cause. Let us tell those who fought in that war that we will never again ask young men to fight and possibly die in a war our government is afraid to let them win.

NARRATOR: Vietnam. A noble cause? A shameful venture?

This television series looks back on a hard chapter in America's history. Two and one half million Americans fought in Vietnam. And 58,000 Americans died there.

Why? America's war in Vietnam lasted 15 years. But the Vietnamese have known war a long time -- more than 2,000 years.

Their traditional enemy was China, their giant neighbor to the north. For centuries, Vietnam was the southernmost part of China's empire. The Vietnamese absorbed Chinese culture and customs, but they never accepted Chinese rule. Today, throughout Vietnam, they commemorate the Trung sisters, who led a rebellion against China in the first century against Christ. The rebellion failed, but the Trung sisters are still heroines -- part of a long line of Vietnamese who fought foreign domination.

PREMIER PHAM VAN DONG: Our history, from the time of the Hung kings and the Trung sisters, to the era of President Ho Chi Minh has been a history of great struggle. Throughout history, the Vietnamese people have always done their best to defend the country and to build the nation.

NARRATOR: They fought for almost a thousand years after the Trungs to evict the Chinese. Then they pushed south to their present borders, conquering other peoples in their path. The country expanded so rapidly that it fragmented in a series of civil wars. Despite their internal conflicts, the Vietnamese regarded themselves as one country and one people, but they were too weak and divided to fight off the conquering Europeans in the nineteenth century.

Around 1860, the French seized the area near Saigon. They took over central and northern Vietnam during the next two decades, and by 1885 Vietnam had once again lost its independence. French Indochina at the end of the 1800s: Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, which the French divided into three regions: Cochinchina, Annam and Tonkin. To the Vietnamese, the division was a deliberate attempt to destroy their national unity.

The Vietnamese resisted. The French called all resisters "pirates", and they sent in the troops for the first "pacification" of Vietnam. They staged public executions. The severed heads were photographed and printed on postcards which soldiers sent home to sweethearts in Paris "with kisses

from Hanoi." It took 20 years to get the Vietnamese resistance under control. Then the French could concentrate on the economics of colonialism, trying to transform Vietnam into a source of profit.

DUONG VAN KHANH: The people here suffered a lot because of high taxes and hard forced labor. They worked from dawn until dusk, but they did not have enough to eat.

NARRATOR: The cheap labor profited a few French companies even though Indochina was a financial sinkhole. The French nation spent millions of francs each year to protect and support the colony, while French companies like Michelin Rubber made millions in profits from factories and plantations.

NARRATOR: There were no major uprisings during these hard years. Vietnamese society was reeling under the impact of Westernization. French culture permeated the cities, bringing Western fashions and ideas. The Vietnamese elite began to give their sons a Western education. Almost all of those who would lead the next resistance to the French were French-educated.

Among them was Ho Chi Minh.

Ho Chi Minh's early years are difficult to trace. He was always mysterious about himself, giving few interviews, and preferring in later life to present himself as the benevolent "Uncle Ho." Ho was born about 1890 as Nguyen Tat Thanh, the son of an official who resigned rather than serve under the French. As a young man, Ho left his country, working as a shiphand and cook in America, Britain and France.

In 1917, Ho moved to Paris. He took the pseudonym Nguyen Ai Quoc, "Nguyen the Patriot," and began to agitate for Vietnam's independence. He tried to plead his cause at the Versailles Conference following World War I, but was not admitted. His effort made him famous among the Vietnamese in France.

In 1920, Nguyen Ai Quoc became a founding member of the French Communist Party, the first Vietnamese Communist. He remained in France editing an anti-colonial paper called *Le Paria (The Outcast)*, and supporting himself as a photographer's assistant. His drawings, published in the newspaper, showed he was still concerned with Vietnam, which he had not seen for ten years.

The Communists sent him to Moscow for training in 1923.

He travelled widely, organizing expatriate Vietnamese into a revolutionary party. Reports during the next 17 years placed him in Germany, China, Thailand, France, Russia.

FRENCH NEWSREEL:

Pathe Journal presents a review of achievements accomplished under the protection of our flag.

In regions of hostility and misery French civilizers have brought peace, work, prosperity and joy.

The French overseas domain is an essential part of the world's economy, an active force of civilization and a glorious testimony to the grandeur of France.

NARRATOR: World War II brought the end of this "grandeur of France." Japan, pursuing its conquest of China, wanted to block the transport of war material through Vietnam. In June 1940, three days after France fell to Nazi Germany, Japan demanded the right to land forces in Indochina.

Japan's arrival deeply impressed the Vietnamese. Asians like themselves had overthrown the European colonials -- for it was clear who was in charge.

NARRATOR: The Japanese supported several Vietnamese nationalist groups. But other groups were both anti-French and anti-Japanese. The most important was the Vietminh, founded in 1941 by Nguyen Ai Quoc. He had returned to Vietnam after 30 years, with a new name: Ho Chi Minh, meaning, "He Who Enlightens."

HOANG QUOC VIET: After the conference to establish the Vietminh, Uncle Ho sent out a letter calling for the support of the population. And it was this that rallied the entire country around the movement. And when people realized that Ho Chi Minh was actually Nguyen Ai Quoc, their trust

in the movement was further established. This was because the name Nguyen Ai Quoc had been widely known in the country. People knew that he was a great patriot.

NARRATOR: The Vietminh organized guerrilla bases, trained cadres, harassed the French and Japanese and spread propaganda, urging the peasants to resist.

INTERVIEWER: Why did the Vietminh fight the Japanese while other Asian nationalists collaborated?

PREMIER PHAM VAN DONG: (Laugh) I apologize, but this is a very funny question. At that time, the Japanese had already overthrown the French and began to dominate our country, so of course we had to fight the Japanese.

NARRATOR: By early 1945, Vietnam was suffering a terrible famine. People blamed the French and Japanese, who were hoarding rice, feeding it to Japanese troops, and even exporting it to Japan -- while an estimated two million Vietnamese out of eight million in the northern areas died.

DR. TRAN DUONG HUNG: At that time, in our estimate, at least 40,000 starving, poor peasants arrived in Hanoi to beg for food and to wait for handouts, for alms. The French did not organize any hunger relief. And the Japanese specifically forbade us to carry out any hunger relief effort of our own. People dug into the garbage dumps in order to find any edible thing at all. They also ate rats. But this was not enough to keep them alive.

NARRATOR: The Vietminh organized the peasants to seize rice stocks, and gained tremendous prestige. This peasant support gave them a political edge they never lost.

PRESIDENT FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT, March 1, 1945:

It's a long tough road to Tokyo. It is longer to go to Tokyo than it is to Berlin, in every sense of the word. The defeat of Germany will not mean the end of the war against Japan...

NARRATOR: As the war in Europe drew to a close, Allied attention turned to Asia and the war against Japan. One of the pressing needs was intelligence. The Vietminh believed Allied statements supporting the rights of oppressed peoples. They had given the Allies information about Japanese troop movements, so the Americans turned to the Vietminh and its leader, Ho Chi Minh.

ARCHIMEDES PATTI (O.S.S. Officer): I first met Ho on the China border between China and Indochina in the last days of April of 1945. He was an interesting individual. Very sensitive, very gentle, rather a frail type. We spoke quite at length about the general situation, not only in Indochina, but the world at large.

ABBOT LOW MOFFAT: We knew he was a Communist, but we also felt, as they did, and the way anybody who has known, met Ho Chi Minh, who I've ever talked with, had the same feeling: he was first a nationalist, and second a Communist. That is, he was interested in getting the independence of his people and then he thought probably the best thing for them was the Communist type of government. But he was a nationalist first and foremost.

NARRATOR: The Vietminh agreed to help the Allies. Major Patti sent a training group, the Deer Mission, into the northern mountains.

ARCHIMEDES PATTI: The Deer team went in and they organized. Out of about 500 Vietnamese, we selected, with the help of General Giap, selected 200. We spent the next four weeks training these young men into the art of using automatic weapons, demolition equipment, infiltrating and exfiltrating into various dangerous areas. There, for the first time, we saw what kind of troops the Vietminh were. They were a very willing, fine young nationalist, really what we used to say "gung ho" type. They were willing to risk their lives for their cause, the cause of independence against the French.

NARRATOR: Before Ho's men could prove their willingness, World War II was over.

The sudden Japanese collapse took many in French Indochina by surprise, but the Vietminh were ready for what they called the "August

Revolution." Declaring Vietnam independent, they marched in to take Hanoi peacefully. Ho Chi Minh formed a government in Hanoi, carefully mixing in members of other nationalist groups. But in the South, away from Ho's moderating influence, his followers started purging rival nationalists. Still with the Vietminh, and perhaps reinforcing the idea of American support, was the OSS.

ARCHIMEDES PATTI: Two or three days after I met Ho, he asked me to come in and stop and see him at which time he wanted to show me something, and what he wanted to show me was a draft of the Declaration of Independence that he was going to declare several days later. Of course, it was in Vietnamese and I couldn't read it and when it was interpreted to me, I was quite taken aback to hear the words of the American Declaration of Independence. Words about liberty, life and the pursuit of happiness, etcetera. I just couldn't believe my own ears.

NARRATOR: On September 2, 1945, on board the U.S.S. *Missouri* in Tokyo Bay, Japan formally surrendered. On the same day throughout Vietnam, the Vietnamese celebrated their self-proclaimed Independence Day and the formation of a new country, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. In Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh read a speech that began, "All men are created equal. They are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights..."

DR. TRAN DUY HUNG: I can say that the most moving moment was when President Ho Chi Minh climbed the steps and the national anthem was sung. It was the first time that the national anthem of Vietnam was sung in an official ceremony. Uncle Ho then read the Declaration of Independence, which was a short document. As he was reading, Uncle Ho stopped and asked, "Compatriots, can you hear me?" This simple question went into the hearts of everyone there. After a moment of silence, they all shouted, "Yes, we hear you!" And I can say that we did not just shout with our mouths but with all our hearts, the hearts of over 400,000 people standing in the square then. After Uncle Ho finished reading the Declaration of Independence, an airplane, a small plane, circled over us. We did not know whose plane it was. We thought that it was a Vietnamese plane. But when it swooped down over us, we recognized the American flag. The crowd cheered enthusiastically.

NARRATOR: Ho appealed to President Harry Truman but he would probably have accepted anyone's support. Truman did not respond to Ho's letters. He had been in office only four months in August 1945 and had not had time to formulate a policy on Indochina.

ABBOT LOW MOFFAT: There was quite a division in the State Department over Indochina. Both the Far Eastern office and the European office were in complete agreement that we wanted a strong France recovered in Europe from the trauma of Vichy and the defeat in the war, but the European division felt that to help get the French back on their feet we should go along with practically anything that the French wanted.

NARRATOR: The Allies had worked out a compromise plan to disarm the Japanese. Above the 16th parallel, the Chinese would take the surrender of Japanese troops. The British would do the same in the South. They arrived in Saigon in early September.

NARRATOR: The British commander, General Douglas Gracey, was a seasoned colonial officer with limited political experience. His orders were to disarm the Japanese, and maintain law and order.

MAJ. PHILIP MALINS: He had absolutely no mandate whatever to start talking about handing over French Indochina to anyone other than the French. He had his straight, strict instructions.

NARRATOR: The Vietminh fought back, but they had few weapons to use against the French troops, and the Vietminh's brutal tactics alienated other southern nationalists.

The French regained control. In the North, Ho's Vietminh had widespread support, but they also faced a problem: 150,000 Nationalist Chinese troops. The Chinese came to disarm the Japanese. They stayed to loot and disrupt and they threatened to remain indefinitely.

Desperate to expel the Chinese, Ho Chi Minh negotiated with the French. In March 1946, they reached an agreement. The French colonial authorities displayed their power as Ho Chi Minh, President of the

Democratic Republic of Vietnam, came to confirm the agreement permitting French troops back for a limited period. In return, France recognized the new Vietnamese state, and the Chinese army left. Ho Chi Minh was gambling that the French would not try to seize power, and that a long-range agreement could eventually be negotiated.

GENERAL VO NGUYEN GIAP: A truce was concluded. There were to be future negotiations to settle the problems between us and France. Under these conditions, we allowed a certain number of French troops to take the place of the nearly 200,000 troops of Chiang Kai-shek, which were to evacuate our country as soon as possible. So we had some breathing time to consolidate our forces.

NARRATOR: The French in Hanoi greeted the arriving troops as conquering heroes. The Vietnamese stayed home. Ho Chi Minh travelled to France to continue the negotiations. But the French cabinet had collapsed. There was no one to negotiate with. He had to play tourist until a new coalition was formed. While he waited, the French administration in Saigon, acting on its own, declared the southern part of Vietnam separate from the North. It was a violation of the March agreement and Ho wondered if there was any point to further negotiations. "Should I go back home?" he asked. He was told the new government would straighten it out in Paris. In 1946, Ho had been famous as a patriot for a quarter of a century, and the Vietnamese in Paris turned out to welcome this first president of an independent Vietnam. The French greeted the veteran Communist formally, as a chief of state. At the time in France, Communists were part of the government. In public, relations were cordial, but in fact the French and Vietnamese negotiators were far apart.

NARRATOR: The negotiations, held at the historic Fontainebleau chateau, went badly. The Vietnamese insisted that southern Vietnam was part of their country. The French would not budge.

PREMIER PHAM VAN DONG: When the meeting began, the chief of the French delegation, Max Andre, said to me: "We only need an ordinary police operation for eight days to clean all of you out." There was no need for negotiations.

GENERAL JEAN-JULIEN FONDE: The solution had to come from Fontainebleau. Then the negotiations at Fontainebleau failed. From then on, relationships deteriorated. The climate deteriorated.

NARRATOR: The March agreement was dead. With French and Vietminh forces at close range, the fighting escalated. There were provocations on both sides. In November 1946, the French shelled Haiphong. Many French officers believed only force would stop the Vietminh.

HENRI MARTIN: When we visited Haiphong afterwards, all the Vietnamese neighborhoods were completely wiped out. There were dead buried under debris... it is difficult to know the exact figure. But the larger part of the city, it seemed to us from what we saw, almost the entire Vietnamese part of the city had been destroyed.

NARRATOR: General Fonde tried to reason with General Giap.

GENERAL JEAN-JULIEN FONDE: "Listen," I said, "I know war: murders, deaths, destruction, bridges blown up, burning houses. This is unthinkable. We have to prevent this." He said to me, "You listen. Politics come before economics. The destruction is not important. The deaths -- one million Vietnamese deaths -- not important. The French will die too. We are ready. It will last two years, five years if necessary. We will no longer give in."

NARRATOR: By late 1946, Ho Chi Minh's government was forced out of Hanoi, out of the cities. The first Vietnam war had started. The French were confident that they could wipe out Giap's ragtag army quickly. They were a modern army with modern weapons, some bought with U.S. aid. The Vietminh had widespread support from the peasants.

DUONG VAN KHANH: I heard about Uncle Ho who fought for the rights of the peasants and the workers. So as a peasant who has suffered a lot, I realized that the only correct thing for me to do was to follow the same path.

NGUYEN THI DINH: At first we did not have any weapons except for bamboo spears. But in the northern part of our country, they were

producing arms. I was appointed to go there to report on the situation in the South. Uncle Ho told me that he carried the South in the depth of his heart, and I should tell him what we needed so that the central government could supply us to fight the French and drive them out of the country. I replied that we needed guns. Uncle Ho said that the central government could only give us so many guns because they did not have many. The main thing, he said, was to capture the enemy's guns and use these guns against them.

NARRATOR: The French bogged down in a quagmire war. Again and again they declared an area "pacified," only to find it slipping back into Vietminh control. The guerrillas seemed to be everywhere and nowhere. In an attempt to take popular support away from the Vietminh, the French created a rival Vietnamese government, the State of Vietnam. As its ruler, the French picked Vietnam's former emperor, Bao Dai. But they placed so many limitations on his regime that to many Vietnamese it did not seem at all independent.

NARRATOR: Nineteen-fifty brought a new source of help to the Vietminh. Mao Zedong's forces arrived at Vietnam's borders, having taken all of China. They extended diplomatic recognition to Ho's government, the first country to do so. The Soviet Union followed quickly. And a week later, the United States recognized Bao Dai's rival state. Lines were being drawn in a continuing Cold War.

DOUGLAS MACARTHUR II (State Department counselor): In the early 1950s, the United States had a concept of communism, international communism as a hard monolithic block of China and Russia with no crevices in it that were seeking to expand and gain a dominant position in the world. In Europe, they had taken over Eastern Europe, pushed into Czechoslovakia; and in Southeast Asia, an area in which we had interests, they seemed to be trying to do the same thing.

PRESIDENT HARRY TRUMAN, 1950:

The cause of freedom is being challenged throughout the world today by the forces of imperialistic communism...

NARRATOR: In May 1950, for the first time, President Truman authorized direct U.S. aid for the French war in Indochina -- \$10 million -- the beginning of an American commitment.

PRESIDENT HARRY TRUMAN:

...They have proved time after time that their talk about peace is only a cloak for imperialism.

NARRATOR: The U.S. commitment deepened after North Korean troops invaded South Korea at the end of June, 1950.

DEAN RUSK: It was decided on the very weekend of the North Korean attack that we would step up our aid very significantly to the French and to Southeast Asia. Because we did not know at that point whether or not the Chinese might attempt to move into that area as part of a general offensive in Asia.

NARRATOR: By the end of 1950, the United States had given \$150 million in aid to the French forces, including planes, tanks, fuel, ammunition and napalm. As U.S. strategists looked at Asia, they saw a spreading Communist menace. The fight in Korea had become an international war. And in Vietnam, the Vietminh had linked up with Communist China. Vietminh war capacities improved dramatically.

COLONEL BUI TIN: We used the new weapons to mount offensives against the French. We were able to wipe out two large French units and capture all their weapons. The way was cleared for communications between Vietnam and the outside world. Then we received military aid from China, especially equipment.

NARRATOR: The defeats on the northern border were a disaster for the French. The Indochina war was no longer just a colonial conflict. It was still small, but it had become international, supported on both sides by major powers. By the end of 1953, America was paying 80 percent of the war, over a billion dollars a year. "Le jaunissement" -- France's Vietnamizing of the war -- and other strategies to gain Vietnamese support had failed. The French controlled the cities, but the Vietminh controlled the countryside. The French controlled the day; the Vietminh, the night. General Henri de Navarre came in as the fifth French

commander in five years.

CAPTAIN JEAN POUGET: When General Navarre arrived, he opened a file right away and on that file I wrote "War Goals." We looked for what to tell the troops. Well, until the end this file remained practically empty. We never could express concretely our war goals.

NARRATOR: General Navarre tried yet another new strategy. French units were set up in remote areas, supplied by air. Their mission was to search out and destroy the Vietminh.

The French planned to test their new strategy in a valley set among the western mountains, 170 miles from Hanoi: Dienbienphu. The Vietminh had passed through the valley during a major attack on Laos. The French expected another attack and thought Dienbienphu would be the place to engage them. In November 1953, 12,000 French troops began dropping into the valley, under the command of Colonel Christian de Castries. The top French command in Saigon was sure that Giap would never be able to mass enough troops around Dienbienphu, never get heavy artillery up the hills, never keep supply lines open. The command at Dienbienphu was equally confident. The artillery officer insisted that no Vietminh gun would be able to fire more than three rounds.

CAPTAIN JEAN POUGET: I saw all sorts of civilian and military authorities go through Dienbienphu. Unless my memory is completely twisted, I don't remember a single one, absolutely not a single one of these authorities who didn't find that Dienbienphu was a formidable base. It was the great land and air base, it was "untakeable."

NARRATOR: The Vietminh saw Dienbienphu as a great opportunity, but a great gamble, too. Ho Chi Minh's forces had lost heavily in attacks on other French strong points. But they decided to take the risk.

CAPTAIN CAO XUAN NGHIA: From Tahinguyen it took us about 45 days. We marched at night and rested during the day. Sometimes we just slept on the roadsides if there were no shelters around.

NARRATOR: The French command was inviting a battle because they thought the Vietminh would never be able to get enough troops and guns to Dienbienphu. But they did. Fifty-one thousand Vietminh soldiers -- four times the number of French troops -- crossed the mountains, carrying supplies on their backs and bicycles, and hauling guns.

NARRATOR: Both sides had a special reason for wanting to win at Dienbienphu. At this same time, January 1954, the great powers were meeting in Berlin. They set a date and place -- April 26 in Geneva -- to meet and discuss Asian issues, including the Indochina crisis. On March 13, Giap launched his attack on Dienbienphu. The battle began with massive "human wave" assaults. The Vietminh guns blanketed French artillery from positions so well dug in and camouflaged that the French planes could not get at them. The first post fell within eight hours. By the next day, March 14, the Vietminh shelling had destroyed the main airstrip. The French command staff was shocked. Colonel de Castries became withdrawn, uncommunicative. On the second night the artillery commander committed suicide saying, "I am completely dishonored." Four days into the battle, the Vietminh controlled the entire perimeter. The cost was high: thousands were dead and wounded among the Vietminh. Giap decided to change strategy.

GENERAL GIAP: This decision on the Dienbienphu front constitutes for me one of the biggest and the most difficult decisions in my fighting life.

COL. BUI TIN: As commander, General Vo Nguyen Giap decided to end this attack based on the human-wave tactic. The entire plan was changed. The attack was stopped and all the heavy artillery pieces were pulled back to a distance. Then trenches and tunnels were dug and the morale of the troops was rebuilt based on the slogan: "Advance solidly, Fight solidly." Shovels became extremely important weapons. All the cadres and soldiers put most of their time and energy into digging trenches and tunnels. We slowly surrounded Dienbienphu with trenches, cutting into the airstrip so it could not be used again, slowly tightening the noose around the necks of the French.

NARRATOR: With the airstrip out, the French garrison was dependent on parachute drops, but Vietminh anti-aircraft fire forced pilots to fly too high. Supplies began falling into enemy hands. General Giap's change in

strategy was working, and he settled in for a long siege. For the French, Dienbienphu became a nightmare. The rainy season started early with drenching downpours. French dugouts and shelters collapsed. Clean water became impossible to find. Medical supplies ran out. No planes could land to evacuate the wounded. Men who were wounded in the trenches sunk under the yard-high mud to die.

JEAN POUGET: I arrived during the night of May 2, and Dienbienphu fell on May 7. The memory I keep of it is one block of time. There was no day or night. I never lay down. I never slept. I don't remember eating. At four o'clock in the morning there was a lull. We were 35 left at my post, with one machine gun, one grenade left. So I asked on the radio, I said, "Since you cannot send reinforcements..." He said, "Where do you want me to get them? You know there is nothing left." "Then give me the authorization to get out." He answered very simply, "No way. You're paratroopers, you're there to die." We built a barricade with corpses at the entrance since we had no sandbags, and we waited. And we saw the shadows coming one by one, the Vietminh. I decided to throw my grenade and we immediately got return fire. One of my last impressions was to feel the wall of corpses shivering under the burst of fire. Then a grenade must have hit my helmet because the net was burned and the helmet dented. American helmets are very solid. I lost consciousness and when I came to, there was above me, very close, a surgeon's mask from which a voice came: "You are a prisoner of the army of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam."

NARRATOR: Though Vietminh combat cameramen were present at Dienbienphu, scenes of the 55-day battle were restaged by a Soviet director after the French defeat. Some of the film sequences are authentic, some re-enacted. Dienbienphu cost the French 1,500 dead, 4,000 wounded, 10,000 taken prisoner. Many of the prisoners died in Vietminh camps. The Vietminh victory at Dienbienphu cost them even more: 8,000 dead, 15,000 wounded.

JOHN FOSTER DULLES, June 1954:

You are all aware that the French and their Vietnam ally have suffered reverses, notably the fall of Dienbienphu after a superb defense. The present situation is grave, but by no means hopeless. In the present conference at Geneva, we and other free nations are seeking a formula by which the fighting can be ended and the people of Indochina assured true independence. So far the Communist attitude at Geneva is not encouraging.

NARRATOR: The Geneva Conference bogged down almost immediately. The United States delegation was ordered to watch and not to talk.

U. ALEXIS JOHNSON: My instructions were to go to the meetings. To not participate in them and not to agree to anything but to be there and sit at the table. And I found that a very difficult job, to sit at a table at which people were making discussions and some conclusions were being arrived at, without agreeing to them; in situations in which silence itself tends to give assent. I can tell you that I was very, very unhappy and perspired very, very freely.

NARRATOR: Emperor Bao Dai, head of the State of Vietnam, also sent a delegation to Geneva.

BAO DAI: I was told I should accept the Communists at the conference table. I said, "No, there is only one Vietnamese state. It is I. The Communists are rebels." Given my uncompromising position they turned the political conference into a military conference.

NARRATOR: In June, the French cabinet fell, and a new prime minister took over, a critic of the war, Pierre Mendes-France. Mendes-France made a promise to the French National Assembly. If he could not resolve the Indochina question at Geneva within 30 days, he would resign. The United States feared this meant France might abandon Indochina to the Communists.

U. ALEXIS JOHNSON: Washington was not at all clear as to what kind of an agreement Mendes-France was proposing to make or what agreement he would make -- and if the agreement was going to be something with which we could possibly live or acquiesce, or whether or not we were going to have to denounce it and, in effect, walk out of the conference.

NARRATOR: After much secret maneuvering, one week before his deadline, Mendes-France got all the participants in place in Geneva. On July 20, the day before the deadline, two issues were still unresolved.

PREMIER PHAM VAN DONG: At the conference there were two issues under discussion: One was the temporary demarcation line between the two regions. And the other was the date of the general elections for the reunification of Vietnam. These two issues were closely connected. That was very clear.

NARRATOR: The Vietminh, flush with their victory at Dienbienphu, took a hard line on both issues, but on the last day, the Soviets and the Chinese forced them to compromise. The Vietminh, who controlled most of the country, would get less than half. The elections to reunify Vietnam would take place; not soon, when the Vietminh would surely win, but in two years. They had been undercut by their own allies. The Soviets and Chinese had several motives, among them, fear; if Mendes-France failed, France might keep fighting and America might intervene.

PREMIER PIERRE MENDES-FRANCE, July 21, 1954:

Reason and peace have won out. After days and nights of hard negotiations, filled with anxiety and hope, the cease-fire has been signed. In my soul and my conscience, I am sure these are the best conditions we could have hoped for in the present state of things.

U. ALEXIS JOHNSON: My own feeling at the end of the conference was that we had probably obtained just about all that could be obtained in the light of the situation on the ground. I don't, I don't think we could have obtained much more. But I must say that very honestly I did not have much optimism that South Vietnam was going to be able to survive.

COL. BUI TIN: We thought that having signed the agreements, the French would now be forced by world opinion to carry out the Geneva accords. And we strongly believed that there would be a general election held in two years, and then the Revolution would certainly win. So we greeted each other, "In two years!" We expected to have a general election and reunification in two years.

NARRATOR: In the fall of 1954, the Vietminh marched into Hanoi, taking back from the French what they had lost eight years before. To America and the world, it looked like the Vietminh would soon be marching into Saigon, too, as the French pulled out, taking everything: houses, trucks, factories, even their dead.

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